Lilting Poet, Back From War, Speaks in Trumpet Tones

A Poet Metamorphosed by War

Sassoon's Lilting Songs Have Given Way to Swift and Illuminating Pictures

By Louis Untermeyer

HE IS thirty-four. He looks twenty-five, except when he is listening to music or reading his brusque, intensified poetry. Then the years seem to pile on him and centuries of poignance are etched on his boyish face. This poet, who at various stages has been a writer of mild, idyllic verse, a keen huntsman, a soldier, a recorder of intensities, has many admirations. But he swears by four gods who, strangely enough, are not in the literary galaxy. They are the three great B's and one other, who—— But Sassoon has paid his own tribute in the first verse of "Dead Musicians":

"From you, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart,
The substance of my dreams took fire;
You built cathedrals inem heart,
And lit my pinnacled desire.
You were the ardour and the bright
Procession of my thoughts toward prayer:
You were the wrath of storm, the light
On distant citadels afiare."

It does not take much probing to discover that Sassoon, had the choice been his, would rather have been a musician than a poet. "A person who has no feeling for music," he said after a Bublig concert, "is like one who goes through life minus one of his senses." This melodic passion surges underneath all his lines, even the most tortured and spasmodic gaspings in "Counter-Attack." Fierce, interrupted, almost strangled, an exaltation rises from Sassoon's poetry like an overtone ringing above cacophonies.

LOUIS UNTERMEYER, who says the sudden rise of Seigfried Sassoon "is the most startling thing in recent literature."

A Startling Rise

Nothing in recent literature is more startling than the sudden rise of Sassoon—the man whom the war changed from a lilting minor poet to the author whose swift and terrible illuminations have been ranked with Latzko's "Men in War" and Barbusse's "Under Fire." In his nonage he loved—and imitated—Browning, Swinburne, Rossetti and even the most limp and amorphous poets of the '90s. Between 1906 and 1917, in the midst of tennis, piano playing and reading, Sassoon brought out some seven volumes; privately printed books bearing such perfumed and semi-precious titles as "Hyacinth," "Melodies," "Orpheus in Doelyrium."

Then came the war, and, leaving the library and the hunting field, Sassoon enlisted as a private in the Sussex Yeomanry. "I entered," says Sassoon, with a cross between a frown and a shamefaced grin, "with a sort of 'happy warrior' feeling; like many others, I was swept by a wave of tremendous emotionalism. Never having shot as much as a rabbit in my life, I thought it would be glorious to die with a gun in my hand. Many of us were, you might say, 'caught bending'—stampeded by a sort of mob heroism. We hailed war at first because it disturbed and shook up a static and almost stagnant world. It was this mood, this release of physical energy that prompted Julian Grenfell's poem 'into Battle' and Rupert Brooke's sonnet-sequence '1914.'"

"And Sassoon's——?" I inquired.

"Well," he said, "you'll find it in one of my earliest war poems, 'Absolution.' It was a mood, strong while it lasted, but one that could not survive. I was in the bloody show for four and a half years." Sassoon neglected to say that he rose to the rank of captain, served three times in France, once in Palestine, had four wounds, was decorated with the Military Cross for bringing in wounded on the battlefield and was recommended for an even higher distinction. "Things began to happen inside. I had been reading only the most jingoistic papers—and believing them. And then, slowly, I was changed from a jolly young enthusiast to a hater of everything that masked its hypocrisy under the false slogans and window dressing of war. It didn't take us long to get fed up with what Mr. Coningsby Dawson so beautifully calls 'The Glory of the Trenches.' There was one thing that life in the trenches stamped on us—and that was the utter baseness, the depravity and horrible futility of all warfare."

Called It Shell Shock

It was at this period of Sassoon's life that he wrote his most incisive and ironic lines. Verses like "The Effect," "They," "Does It Matter?" "How to Die," found their inevitable climax in that magnificent protestation "To Any Dead Officer." It was natural that from these Sassoon should turn to the political aspects of the war. In the letter that caused such a frantic shaking of heads and ultimately an embarrassed debate in the House of Commons, the aroused poet, anticipating the disillusioned idealists and belated skeptics, wrote: "The purpose for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change it. I am protesting not so much against the conduct of the war as against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed."

After the "shell shock" to which his manifesto was attributed, Sassoon rejoined his regiment and commanded his company for six months until wounded (in July, 1918), while taking part in a bombing raid. Then came the first poems for the new volume.

It is his sense of outrage, coupled with a loathing of what Sassoon calls the "death-and-glory swank," that burns beneath the more restrained poems in "Picture-Show" (E. P. Dutton & Co.). Bitterness and a dark humor are still here, but a new and more controlled ironism tightens and keys up his lines. It is the kind of searing satire that Brooke, had he lived, might well have written. Never wholly "above the battle" poems like "Night on the Convoy," "Twelve Months After," "Reconciliation," "The Dug-Out," have a new pathos; there is fresh force in the adjuration which is significantly entitled "Aftermath" and which begins: "Have you forgotten yet? . . .
For the world's events have rumbled on since those gagged days,
Like traffic checked a while at the crossings of city ways:
And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts that flow
Like clouds in the lit heavens of life; and you're a man reprieved to go,
Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.
But the past is just the same—and War's a bloody game . . .
Have you forgotten yet? . . .
Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget.
Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz—
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sand bags on parapets?
Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench—
And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
Do you ever stop and ask, 'Is it all going to happen again?'"

Lighter Magic

But the surprise of the volume is in Sassoon's lighter magic. Some of the most memorable verses in "Picture-Show" are those in which one meets a shy whimsicality, a twinkling gravity. One of these reflections is "Early Chronology," where, after an evening of archæological discussion, even the moon takes on the appearance of some ancient copper coin:

"And, as her whitening way aloft she took,
I thought she had a pre-dynastic look."

One perceives this same mock profundity in "Prelude to an Unwritten Masterpiece," the droll banter of "Sporting Acquaintances" and the delightful literary whimsy in "Limitations." And here is a new etching of the oldest hero, mourning for the renegade son who had far more of "the old Adam" than the effeminate Abel:

"ANCIENT HISTORY

"Adam, a brown old vulture in the rain,
Shivered below his wind-whipped olive trees;
Huddling sharp chin on scarred and scraggy knees,
He moaned and mumbled to his darkening brain:
'He was the grandest of them all—was Cain!
A lion laired in the hills, that none could tire;
Swift as a stag; a stallion of the plain,
Hungry and fierce with deeds of huge desire.'

"Grimly he thought of Abel, soft and fair—
A lover with disaster in his face,
And scarlet blossom twisted in bright hair.
'Afraid to fight; was murder more disgrace? . . .
God always hated Cain.' . . . He bowed his head—
The gaunt wild man whose lovely sons were dead."

Praise for Hardy

With the exception of fugitive traces of Masefield and Walter de la Mare, Sassoon's verse betrays no influences. It is as difficult to find his models as to get him to speak of his contemporaries. He will quote from his friends Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, Osbert Sitwell; he mentions poems by Hodgson, Davies, Abercrombie, D. H. Lawrence and W. J. Turner. But he will speak continually of only one singer; he is unreserved in his enthusiasm for a writer who is known in America chiefly as a novelist. "What great poets are there in England? There may be several, but I am sure of one—and one of the greatest. The man who antedates Henley and Kipling, the oldest of English writers; Thomas Hardy at the age of eighty is the youngest and most modern of us all."

Sassoon comes to America for a three months' sojourn, lecturing, reading his poetry and studying what is inclusively referred to as "conditions." For it must be understood that besides being a creator Sassoon is a critic—the literary editor of London's greatest labor paper, "The Daily Herald." It is this variety of interests, this range of sympathies, that make this intense and sensitive writer distinguished not only as a poet but as a person. His "Picture-Show," following closely upon the amazing "Counter-Attack," proves it.

Book Gossip

A Traveler in the South Seas

When Frederick O'Brien, author of "White Shadows in the South Seas" (The Century Company), returned a fortnight ago from a year spent traveling through Asia, he was asked to say a few words about his most recent adventures. His surprising reply was: "I return more fixed than ever in my belief that my beloved cannibals of the South Seas are the only real philosophers I have ever known. I saw whites in Siberia destroying one another, while the Japanese said 'Banzai,' which means 'the more dead the more space.' I saw religionists stopping the marking and sweeping of the path to heaven to clout one another, while the heathen smiled in long sleeves. And I heard eminent American prophets of business preaching the new war in the Far East, while the poppies are frozen in Flanders fields on the bosoms of uncounted dead."

Mr. O'Brien was asked what were his plans for the future, and whether he intended to write another book of his wanderings in foreign lands. He answered: "I return to Glendale, Calif., my home for ten years past, to continue to grow goats and goldfish, beings which live in amity and wag their tails at humanity. The mocking birds dance on the lawn by my window, the redbreast drinks at my fountain, and my dog breathes heavily in the sun. But my book and let me stay a while. I traced 'White Shadows in the South Seas' here among the kids and the brilliant dwellers with the lilies and papyrus, and need but time and sustenance to emit, mayhap, some other glimmer of whimsical intelligence."

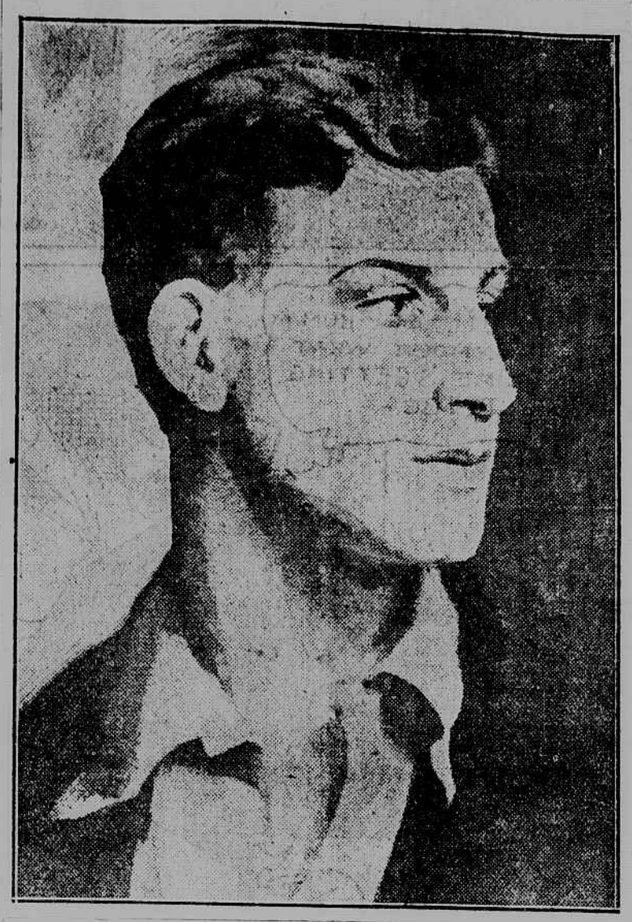
To satisfy the curiosity of the I-do-wonder-what-the-author-looks-like group, Mr. O'Brien endeavored to sketch his personality and appearance from a purely disinterested point of view. "I am still young," he said with enthusiasm, then added modestly, "and fair and unafraid of most manifestations. My favorite sport is swimming in the sea, and my leisure is spent most satisfactorily lying on my back in the grass or on the beach." He likes alligator pears, mangosteens and durians, papayas and corned beef. He said he was brought up in a monastery, is all Celt in blood, loves symphonies, but most of all the accordion. "I like nakedness better than clothing," he concluded, "and during my happiest year wore only a breadfruit leaf pinned with a thorn."

Pioneer Plays

Early in March, the Century Company announces it will publish a romantic, human-interest narrative of the spectacular movement of westward expansion in the old Southwest during the years between 1740 and 1790, written by Archibald Henderson, mathematician, author and literary critic. Dr. Henderson is the professor of pure mathematics at the University of North Carolina and holds the degrees of A. M. (University of North Carolina), Ph. D. (University of North Carolina and University of Chicago), and Doctor of Civil Law (University of the South). He spent many months in research work in the universities of Cambridge, Berlin and Paris, and during a period of eleven months he gave to the world five books that were published in both England and America, besides making frequent contributions to leading American and foreign magazines. He ranks as an authority on the movement of westward expansion in America during the eighteenth century. His new book, to be published by the Century Company, is the result of exhaustive research in the English archives, in the great libraries and collections of this country and in the extensive collection of documents in public repositories in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky. Among Dr. Henderson's earlier books are "Interpreters of Life and the Modern Spirit," "George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works," and "European Dramatists."

"Slippy McGee"

"Slippy McGee," by Marie Conway Oemler, according to the Century Company, has been ordered back to the presses for the eighth time. This is the whimsical Southern love story that a Bostonian with poor eyesight had reprinted in large type at a cost of $900 after he had heard it read aloud.



SIEGFRIED SASSON, who once wrote poems under such titles as "Hyacinth" and "Melodies" but, after four years in the trenches, chooses such titles as "How to Die" and "To Any Dead Officer"

About a Column

JUST to remind readers, we repeat the statement made some months ago, that any one whose letter is printed in this column may come to room 323 in the Tribune Building and choose a book as his honorarium.

Sinclair Lewis on Jurgen

I am shocked, but also incredulous, to hear rumors that certain authorities may proceed against James Branch Cabell's "Jurgen" as an indecent book. It seems to me incredible that any person of discrimination should not understand that "Jurgen" is a dignified and noble piece of literature, comparable not to cheap novels, but to the classics of fiction and as devoid of indecency as the Bible or the plays of Shakespeare. Like those, it at times deals with deep, though normal, human passions, but also, like them, it deals with these emotions in a reverent manner, with the cleanness of understanding and knowledge.

I know nothing as to who or what may be behind the attack, if there really is one, but certainly any person who finds the book indecent must be reading indecency into it. That is a possible thing to do with the most innocent book or remark. It is possible to read lewdness into a scientific reference to approaching childbirth.

I wonder if any attackers of the book may not have been influenced by the fact that there are and have been lascivious and vile plays running openly, without let or hindrance, in New York and other cities, into supposing that here, in this story of the love of an unhappy and lonely man, there is also such vileness? That the dozen or more dirty farces familiarly known as "bedroom plays" should be allowed to exhibit, while this noble work of art by a literary man of high and clean reputation is estopped, is alarming, amazing and filled with all injustice.

As a matter of fact, far from being indecent, "Jurgen" is the story of a man of so high an ideal of love that he treasures it all through his life, and even when opportunity offers refuses to risk soiling it by any carnal contact.

I speak with all modesty, but I also wish to speak as, in some degree, an expert, being not only a professional writer, the author of several novels, etc., but also having been the editor for George Doran, the publisher; editor for Frederick Stokes, the publisher; editor on several magazines and newspapers and for a goodly time a professional book reviewer in charge of various important book pages.

I have read, if I remember, that Hugh Walpole has praised "Jurgen." That should be impressive testimony to its art and importance. Mr. Walpole is undoubtedly the most brilliant of the younger British literary men, coming now to rank with Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy, and his praise of the book—precisely because it does come from a foreigner and not from an American, who might be prejudiced—indicates the book's extraordinary merit.

SINCLAIR LEWIS.

We Read and We Writhe

The following floweret is plucked from the stenographic report of a lecture lately delivered by one of the more prominent female American poets before an audience of girls, in a fashionable Hudson River heifer paddock—as they used to say in Australia:

"While the American novel and the American drama find worthy and capable authors, the two domains of criticism and the short story are at present utterly bare of either talent or that mastery of manner that passes as talent. The only critic—whether of books or plays—now writing capably is Mr. Francis Hackett, an Englishman. The only passable producer of short stories is Mrs. Edith Wharton, whose long residence in Paris has schooled her to the point of excellence in the delineation of reasonable human beings. To read the average matter set forth as criticism in the New York dailies is to be nauseated, and the American short story as published in the usual magazine is fit only for the American sailor or the Irish shopgirl."

Wind that about your heart and die writhing, will you?

A CELTIC STENOGRAPHER (male).

Yes, but if it comes to the attention of Francis Hackett that he is "an Englishman" it will be his turn to writhe.

Unchanging Ireland

Elizabeth Nester Depicts Disorders of 16th Century

"ELIZABETHAN ULSTER," by Ernest Hamilton (Dutton), is a strikingly vivid picture of the turbulent and disordered condition of Ireland during the sixteenth century. Mr. Hamilton's narrative, based upon a thorough and conscientious study of the historical records of the period, is a chronicle of raids, invariably accompanied by massacre and pillage, of incessant civil war between native Irish chieftains, Scotch adventurers and the English officials whose power was already acknowledged in Eastern Ireland.

In the time of Elizabeth, Ulster had not become a bulwark of Protestantism and loyalty to the British Crown. The Scotch and English settlers who gave it this character entered the province at a later date. The Scotch intruders who figure in Mr. Hamilton's book, are Highlanders, somewhat akin in speech and customs to the Irish themselves. In fact, in its lack of any central authority, in its fierce clan loyalties, which often culminated in bloodshed, and in its primitive economic condition Ulster was quite similar to the Highlands.

Historians are supposed to be impartial; but very few of them achieve this quality. In fact, the passions suppressed in searching through piles of dusty manuscripts often find expression in violent praise or denunciation of men who have been interred for many centuries.

In "The Soul of Ireland" Mr. Hamilton vigorously presented Ulster's reason for opposing Home Rule. The present work is not written from a consciously partisan standpoint; but it is difficult to repress a suspicion that the author derives a certain amount of satisfaction from emphasizing the squalor and savagery of sixteenth century Ireland and presenting the contemporary Scotch and English in a more favorable light. "Elizabethan Ulster" is a challenge to some Sinn Fein scholar to write a similar work, equally excellent from the historical standpoint, vindicating the fabled glory of Shane, the Proud, and Hugh O'Neil.

New Loeb Publications

Four new volumes in the Loeb Classical Library have just been published by G. P. Putnam's Sons. The first two books of Livy's history are translated by B. O. Foster, while the first two books of Thucydides' "History of the Peloponnesian War" are rendered into English by C. Foster Smith. Walter C. A. Ker translates some of Martial's witty epigrams, while the poems of Ausonius, a product of the declining age of the Roman Empire, are translated by H. G. Evelyn-White. The works are provided with introductions and bibliographies; and they all reveal the high standard of scholarship that is characteristic of the entire series.

The Human Race in Decline

Henry Adams Takes Dark View of Humanity's Future

NO AMERICAN family, and few if any English families, can equal the record of the Adamses in the field of intellectual activities and in decisive ability to express these activities in the written word. From John Adams down to the present time no decade in American history has lacked an Adams who thought independently and wrote vigorously.

We now have before us "The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma," by Henry Adams, with an introduction of 122 pages by Brooks Adams, published by the MacMillan Company, New York. Curiously enough, this preamble is not too long, for it gives us the literary heritage of Henry Adams and of the other members of the family during the last half century, which was profoundly affected by the life and writings of John Quincy Adams. Brooks Adams has given us in this introduction a view of John Quincy Adams seldom glimpsed, one that presents him as a type of the American in politics who fights and suffers for the establishment of democratic principles.

To the old man's horror, the development and extension of the railroad systems of the United States, and the invention of the cotton gin, resulted in a palpable swinging away from his pole of ambition. There came an unholy scramble for land and a strengthening of slavery through the opening of new eras by the railroad and the use of Whitney's invention in the South.

"The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma" is written with the keen closeness of application shown by Henry Adams in all his works. It is a terribly effective book, for its survey of the decline and weakening of the mode of democracy, as effected by the inability of men to cohere, is logical to a degree that appals the reader. And the great synonym is in the story of the world itself, in the long record of the appearance and disappearance of animal and plant forms, in the changes of the earth's physical structure through phases of existence profoundly influenced by the shrinking and contracting of the terrestrial crust.

These changes find their similitudes in the life of man. Where we have a slow but continued dissipation of energy in nature, we do not have a refuge in the constructive struggle of man as a race to build protective defenses against the deadly attrition. Where Democracy should unite all its elements, solve problems of betterment and inaugurate movements aiming to uplift the race and strengthen it for its long struggle, Democracy is flying to pieces in its several members. The Democratic Dogma has failed, for men are selfish and not considerate of others.

So, through a series of ever lowering averages, we are slipping downwards. The science of the physical world proves it, and the history of man affirms it. And yet it seems to us that the faith of old John Quincy Adams in his God should help us in the face of the disquieting outlook. Tennyson may be somewhat of an antique to many of us, but his

"world's great altar stairs
That slope through darkness up to God"

give the picture of an ever ascending scale in life and in battle.

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